

## Maybe We Should Look at Other Countries

Alexander Kuzminov



### Abstract

Affordable health care is becoming more and more of a problem in the United States. The quality of health care is also under scrutiny. Different countries reached their health care strategies through application of their experiences and their abilities. The main agenda was to provide inexpensive and highly effective health care to their citizens. Many countries chose acupuncture as either the main modality of treatment or as a treatment equal in value with an allopathic treatment. In the US, the public and medical community still need to be educated about the benefits of Oriental Medicine and acupuncture. Acupuncture, in particular, is often still looked at as something mystical and enigmatic, sometimes even the art of a charlatan. This article summarizes how three less developed countries have used acupuncture to improve their citizens' health without significant capital outlay or great cost to consumers. Many questions remain about how to address health care issues, both in America and around the world; but looking at the state of health care in China, Cuba, and Tajikistan can provide insight into the potential from acupuncture and Oriental Medicine worldwide.

### Biography

Alexander Kuzminov is a licensed acupuncturist in New York and Connecticut. He graduated from Pacific College of Oriental Medicine Magna Cum Laude with a degree in Master of Science in Oriental Medicine. For many years Alex has worked with different medical doctors which allowed him to have good understanding of how to combine western treatments with the acupuncture and herbal treatments. Alexander Kuzminov also has a BSEE (Bachelor of Science Electrical Engineering) Degree. He finds that having a background in engineering helps to deepen his understanding of many aspects of acupuncture. Alex is also an accomplished martial arts practitioner, having studied Karate, Aikido and Sun Do Korean Yoga. Many years ago Alexander Kuzminov met a teacher who introduced him to the rare skill of using the ancient I-Ching system when treating different illnesses. When the I-Ching principle is employed in tandem with acupuncture and herbal medicine, profound and lasting results can be achieved for a wide variety of health conditions. Alex specializes in using scalp acupuncture to treat many different illnesses. He finds that this particular therapy has excellent results particularly in the treatment of multiple sclerosis, parkinson's disease, asthma, neurological problems and pain that has not been resolved by using different treatment modalities. Alexander Kuzminov is an Associate Professor of Acupuncture at the University of Bridgeport. He teaches acupuncture related courses and supervises students at the University Acupuncture Clinic.

For decades Americans have had increasing difficulty accessing quality health care due to rising insurance costs and out-of-pocket expenses for hospital stays, doctors' visits and prescriptions. Though the United States of America is one of the world's most advanced societies, according to the World Health Organization, the country ranks only 37th out of 190 when countries are compared according to overall health system performance and 71 on the level of overall health. There is another extremely alarming fact. The United States ranks first in health expenditure per capita vis-à-vis the other 190 countries included in the study.<sup>1</sup> No wonder Americans are alarmed and many feel health care reform is sorely needed.

In the July 2009 issue of *Acupuncture Today*, an article referenced President Obama's positive outlook towards acupuncture and other alternative therapies that have proven track records.<sup>2</sup> The President's openness suggests great promise for acupuncture practitioners and for the health care delivery system. Acupuncture may finally be incorporated into mainstream medicine and more Americans will derive the benefits that have been available in other countries and cultures for decades, even centuries.

In the United States, the public and the medical community still need to be educated about the benefits of Oriental Medicine and acupuncture. Acupuncture, in particular, is often still looked at as something mystical and enigmatic. It is at times still viewed as the art of a quack.<sup>3</sup> However, the World Health Organization (WHO) has compiled a list of illnesses

successfully treated by acupuncture. This list was created by medical doctors and is available online at their website.<sup>4</sup> Many doctors in the United States don't know about this list and many still consider acupuncture untested and perhaps even unsafe. Nevertheless in many other countries acupuncture is utilized as an effective alternative to Western medicine. But what about other countries? What do other nations do to keep their citizens healthy? What happens if there are shortages of antibiotics or common medications in hospitals? What do they offer to their population?

This article summarizes how three culturally different countries have used acupuncture to improve their citizens' health without significant capital outlay or great cost to consumers. Many questions remain about how to address health care issues, both in the United States and around the world; but looking at the state of health care in China, Cuba, and Tajikistan can provide insight into the potential for acupuncture and Oriental Medicine worldwide.

## **China**

We shall begin by considering China's history of health care. Why China? China has a very rich history and many Chinese medical texts written centuries ago are still considered quintessential to Chinese medicine and acupuncture. China is also considered to be the first country that used acupuncture for treating illness. Acupuncture and herbal medicine go back into the root of Chinese culture. The oldest book written about Chinese medi-

cine was *Haung Di Nei Jing*. This book outlines different treatment and healing strategies for overall health. The text tells not only how to treat diseases but also how to live in such a way as to prevent illness. No one knows who wrote the book, but it became one of the cornerstones of Chinese medicine.

The concepts of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism are also at the heart of Chinese medicine. These traditions have maintained some level of currency even during the periods of Western colonization and communist rule. The concept of the Great Wall preventing other peoples from infiltrating China and stealing its knowledge did not work. By the nineteenth century, civilizations that had surpassed China technologically, such as the British, defied the Middle Kingdom's long-standing traditions and demoralized China's citizens. The country also lost a great deal during the opium wars (1839-1842 and 1856-1860) with England. Many of China's citizens sacrificed their sobriety due to the forced trade of opium for Chinese manufactured goods and tea. As a result of British domination, China almost became a British colony and it was sectorized into spheres of influence by the major European powers. Hong Kong was an example of the British dominance—it became a British colony and was returned to China only in 1997.

During its occupation by Western powers, China started to lose its affinity for acupuncture and Chinese medicine. Instead China began to adopt Western ways

of treating illness. Some Chinese doctors who studied in Japan proclaimed Chinese medicine unscientific and fueled a movement to prohibit doctors to practice it.<sup>5</sup> This was accomplished in 1947. Out of twenty Chinese medical schools in Guangdong province only one school of Chinese medicine remained. Yet people



*An antique chest used to store Chinese medicinal herbs*

still believed in its effectiveness. Its therapeutic results could not be overlooked and it still remained a treatment of choice. Thus China, a country that by 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, had more success than the West in treating many difficult diseases risked losing the unique and proven methods of Chinese medicine.

When China's internal war between communist and nationalist forces ended in 1949, China's economy found itself in shambles. Most medications needed to be imported and were extremely costly. Rural areas in particular suffered from shortages of medicine. Western-trained doctors were typically located far away from people in remote villages who required treatments and could not afford health

care.<sup>6</sup>

China thus started to rebuild. Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM)—acupuncture and herbal medicine became favored by the Communist government because they were simple, effective and economically feasible. Treating people with acupuncture, after all, required only some needles and a location where the patient could be treated, not the expensive equipment and facilities required for Western treatment methods.

In addition, effective and inexpensive therapies to supplement acupuncture were revived. These were Gua Sha, cupping and moxibustion. Gua Sha is a simple technique that was performed with a Chinese soup spoon. By scraping a specific part of the body with the spoon the doctor moved away the obstruction in the tissues and allowed for the blood to better circulate through the muscle. It was commonly used to treat muscle pain due to cold and damp weather, neck pain or lower back pain. This is still a very common technique used today in China and in the US.

Cupping was done with bamboo cups used for water drinking. It was used for injuries, pain and asthma, as well as coughing. Using a light wooden stick a doctor would create a vacuum in a cup by quickly inserting and withdrawing it from the cup. Then just as quickly, the cup would be placed of the back or the shoulder or any other part of the body by the doctor. Moxibustion is a technique to warm the point where acupuncture is to be administered and, by doing that, bring

energy into the body. To perform moxibustion, herbs tightly rolled into a cigar type shape were lit, then applied to the points being treated. This method was used to treat arthritis, pain, gynecological issues and many more conditions.

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There was, however, another reason why Chinese medicine was revived. The future leader Mao Zhedong, while fighting for the communists during 1934-1935, had ordered Chinese medicine be used to treat soldiers combat illness during that year of fighting.<sup>7</sup> This revival on the battlefield should have come as no surprise since Chinese medicine has its origins in treating soldiers after battle. This practice dates back many centuries. The injuries sustained from spears, swords and, later, gun powder had been effectively treated for centuries through Chinese medicine. The world famous acupuncture point Zu San Li was successfully used as a location for giving soldiers increased vitality. Once he came into power, Chairman Mao insisted on the use of Chinese medicine and he rescinded the law that had been en-



acted forbidding acupuncture and Chinese medicine. By the end of 1950, Traditional Chinese Medicine was integrated into all medical schools, and physicians were required to study it even if they were to use only Western medicine in their practice.<sup>8</sup>

At that time, China suffered from a shortage of doctors in rural areas and acupuncture “came to the rescue.” A technique used in Northeast China was re-designed and used as a part of general practice. It was called “Barefoot Doctor Acupuncture” because it was practiced by laborers and by farmers who worked in the field barefoot and who had minimal medical training.<sup>9</sup> Acupuncture was performed on a set of points that were easy to find and were simple to needle. These points were located at a specific spinal vertebra. Even today, these points on the spinal vertebrae are used to treat skin disease, headaches, acute arthritic pain, asthma, bronchitis, nephritis, diabetes, impotence, incontinence, eye diseases, liver diseases and many other common conditions. Today China’s health care system integrates acupuncture and Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) with Western treatment methods with positive results. There seems to be a great deal of synergy and respect for each modality of treatment. The People of China can be said to benefit from the “best of both worlds.”

## **Cuba**

Another country that we should briefly survey is Cuba. Before the 1959 Communist Revolution, Cuba was an island tourist destination for people from many

countries and from the United States, in particular. Besides tourism, Cuba’s main export products were represented by cigar manufacturing and sugar cane production. There was only one medical school before 1959 but Cuba had its share of great doctors and was one of the world leaders in life expectancy. When Cuba became a communist country it adopted a political structure similar to the Soviet Union. Medical care was now free for every citizen. However, when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1992, the million of dollars supplied to Cuba by Moscow came to an abrupt halt. Cuba fell into dire financial circumstances and lacked sufficient funds to support itself. It also needed a new medical health care system. The extant one had relied too heavily on medications and equipment from the Soviet Union and a few of its satellites. The system needed to be rebuilt, but how? What kind of medical treatments would be efficient and financially feasible? How would Cuba deliver necessary medication and treatments to its people?

In Cuba, health care had been free. Doctors went into medicine not to become rich but because they wanted to provide health care for people. Health care was looked at as a government provided service. Doctors were paid by the government. People would use a family doctor first, then a clinic and then a hospital. This was the progression of providers the Cuban citizen could receive, similar to the delivery systems found in Great Britain and Canada.

After the Soviet Union collapsed, Cuba found itself in a situation similar to

China's in 1949. Cuba had to rebuild its health system from scratch, with no money to purchase much needed medication from the West. China had its long history of Chinese medicine to fall back on but what about Cuba? Cuba lacked the same background and also had little food, which further complicated efforts to address the needs of the sick and malnourished. But Cuba, just like China, had some very creative and knowledgeable doctors.<sup>10</sup> Some Cuban doctors had traveled to China in the 1960s and 1970s to study acupuncture and Chinese medicine. They brought back knowledge of the ancient techniques of acupuncture and Post Soviet era Cuba was the opportune venue to put this knowledge to the test. There was a list created by the WHO that identified specific illnesses that had been successfully treated by acupuncture and related knowledge that Cuban doctors accumulated from practicing acupuncture on their patients in the period prior to 1992.<sup>11</sup> Things had become so difficult at that time that one doctor treated patients with acupuncture and sustained himself just by drinking water sweetened by cane sugar.<sup>12</sup> Even Cuban emergency room procedures began to use acupuncture when appropriate. Operating room procedures were done with acupuncture for anesthesia.<sup>13</sup> The doctors, trained in Chinese medicine, also began to use techniques for diagnosis as well as treatment. For example, there is one acupuncture pressure point that can be used to help to diagnose gallstones and another point can help in the diagnosis of appendicitis. These points proved useful when Cuba lacked equipment to perform other appropriate testing.<sup>14</sup>

By 1996, Cuba began to integrate acupuncture into the Cuban health care system more systematically. Shortly thereafter, statistics began showing improvements in the health of Cuba's citizens. They experienced, for example, less cardiovascular disease, diabetes, asthma, and hypertension.<sup>15</sup>



## **Tajikistan**

Drug problems often have the greatest effects in less developed countries where poverty and lack of jobs contribute to increased narcotics use. The small country of Tajikistan, for example, has served for many years as the gateway for narcotics trafficking between Afghanistan and Russia and Europe. After the fall of the Soviet Union and outbreak of a civil war in Tajikistan in 1997 the drug problem began to escalate. According to *Demoscope Weekly* magazine, the number of drug users increased from 57 in 1992 to over 6,192 in 2004. Over the last 10 years anti-drug security forces in Tajikistan confiscated over 62 tons of narcotics.

While, in recent years, the cotton and alu-

minum industries have grown and have begun to provide reasonable income, many of Tajikistan's citizens still get paid less than \$1.25 per day. However, the drug use problem continues to rise, affecting teenagers and adults alike

Since treatments for drug users are costly and not easily affordable for many, the Tajik government started to look for inexpensive, easy-to-use methods that could nevertheless provide effective treatment. They found significant promise in the United States, where, in New York City's Bronx borough in the 1970's, a medical doctor discovered a way to treat drug addiction with auricular acupuncture rather than with methadone. This protocol of the National Acupuncture Detoxification Association (NADA) had been used successfully for at least 20 years and with good results. In 2004, a seminar on NADA was presented to Tajik physicians. This is what one of them said afterwards: "Auricular acupuncture is a very simple way that does not require extra spending. All one needs is a room and a specialist. This method is a great help to us to deal with the period of drug dependency when a patient goes through a withdrawal period."<sup>16</sup>

Further study has shown this protocol effective in helping alcoholics or smokers recover from their addictions. The aforementioned are valuable examples of acupuncture use when finances are limited and extreme measures are needed.

### **In Summary**

These examples demonstrate how three culturally distinct countries have utilized

acupuncture and Traditional Chinese Medicine to provide quality health care at affordable costs. Given their success, one might ask why the United States might not benefit from this. In the United States, we need to work to benefit patients that are desperately in need of effective treatment. The need exists to increase the level of health system performance given to the United States by the WHO from 37 to number 1 and to increase our level of overall health number at least by two. The United States health care expenditures are astronomical. Given the investment into our health care services, the United States should rank as best in the world but we lag far behind in many areas. Reducing health care expenditures dramatically in the United States by 50% without compromising on care needs may be an appropriate goal and hopefully treatments that have succeeded in places such as China, Cuba, Tajikistan and even in the Bronx can be more widely dispersed in parts of the developing world including Africa, South and Southeast Asia and in Latin America.

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